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ABSTRACT

The role of workplace literacy and numeracy education in the introduction of new workplace practices was examined in a case study of a local council in New South Wales, Australia. Two researchers worked over a 6-week period to interview the manager, 2 team leaders, and 15 team members involved in the introduction of competitive maintenance and construction teams. The interviews focused on the following: the literacy and numeracy practices involved in working in new competitive construction and maintenance teams, workers' responses to competitive teams, and the education and training implications of competitive teams for the council's construction and maintenance workers. Team members' literacy and numeracy skills were generally low; however, low literacy and numeracy skills were not likely to affect their job performance as maintenance/construction workers. The team members generally resisted the new teams and tended to view the teams and discourse of "a new work order" as devices to get them to work harder rather than to simply work "smarter." The manager and supervisors were acting in what they considered workers' best interests by making workers more competitive; however, by imposing changes "from above," they in fact increased some workers' private resistance. (Contains 104 references.) (MN)

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Teamwork, Discourses and Literacy

A case study
of workers'
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introduction of
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practices

Stephen Black

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1. INTRODUCTION

The scope and significance of this research study

This research study has a number of key features. First, it examines the broader cultural changes involved in a local council's attempts to introduce 'competitive teams' in one section of its fieldwork operations. Second, it examines the role of the literacy and numeracy practices involved in the introduction of these competitive teams. And finally, it views these aspects largely from the perspectives of the participants most affected by them, the council field workers.

The introduction of new workplace practices such as 'teamwork' is increasingly well documented, but this documentation falls largely within a managerial discourse in which these practices are perceived uncritically as a measure of progress in workplace reform, leading to increased productivity, worker empowerment and job satisfaction (eg National Food Industry Training Council Ltd, 1995). This research study, on the other hand, presents some contrasting perspectives on the introduction of new workplace practices, but with the central focus on the perspectives of the council field workers rather than management. As a consequence, this study presents a discourse featuring contradiction and resistance, which is relatively rare in the literature on the introduction of new workplace practices (for some notable examples of such a discourse, see Darrah, 1992; Foley, 1994, 1997; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996; Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1993).

A local council and microeconomic reform

The context for this study is a local council in New South Wales. Like the majority of local councils, this council is being forced to confront microeconomic reform. This is the result of a process of reform that began in the late 1980s, a period which Jones (1989:9-10), in a study of the management of local councils, refers to as the 'rediscovery of capitalism'. In more recent years the pace of microeconomic reform has increased in the wake of local government acts (eg the NSW Local Government Act 1993) which stipulate higher degrees of public accountability, and the National Competition Policy (Report by the Independent Committee of Inquiry [Hilmer], 1993) which exposes councils to the 'competitive marketplace'. Already, there have been strong moves towards this 'free-market economic rationalism' overseas (eg in the United Kingdom, United States of America,

Canada and New Zealand), and in other Australian states (Mellor, 1997). In Victoria, for example, local councils have been forced to 'contract out' many of their services, and in some NSW councils there are examples of 'business units' being created in order to make some areas of council work profitable or at least self-funded.

This study focuses on the section of a local council which deals with the maintenance of footpaths and drains and construction projects such as laneways and roundabouts. In mid 1996 this section of the council was undergoing reform with the introduction of new workplace practices, and in particular, 'competitive teams'. While management claimed there was no immediate imperative enforcing these reforms, nevertheless these reforms need to be seen in light of the above broader economic environment and the fact that other councils nearby had already acted. There was the general view, promoted and accepted from management down to council field workers, that the introduction of new workplace practices such as teamwork were essential to ward off the inevitable 'privatisation' of council work. Thus, jobs were seen to be threatened unless this section of council work could 'get its act together' and become competitive with outside contractors, thereby negating the possibility of privatisation in the near future. This, in essence, was how the introduction of competitive teams was put to council field workers: become competitive or lose your jobs.

This study was undertaken during the 'crucial' 'trial period' of the introduction of competitive work teams. Management had decided to establish a limited number of competitive teams while the rest of the work 'gangs' continued in their traditional manner. If the competitive teams concept worked, then some months later the idea was for all the maintenance and construction gangs to become 'competitive teams'.

Some team leaders (or gangers as they are traditionally referred to) were selected through open advertising, while others were selected based on application from within the existing council workforce, and these leaders subsequently had some say in their choice of team members. Becoming a member of a competitive team was voluntary, but significantly at this stage in the trial, only the selected team leaders received any extra pay.

During this trial period each team leader (or ganger) kept accurate records of all the activities involved in each job they undertook, and these were costed carefully. The first stage in becoming competitive was to know precisely the unit costs involved in each job. Previously this had been a matter of concern for management only.

The manager of the section, in his efforts to ensure the success of competitive

teams, organised a training program obligatory for all maintenance and construction workers. The training program ran over several weeks and involved three or four sessions of 'classroom' work conducted in the depot's training room in work time. The main idea of the training program was to ensure all workers were aware of the reasons for the introduction of new workplace practices and what was expected of the workers.

In concluding this brief description of the context for this study it is important to provide a broad description of the workers, because their characteristics have a bearing on a number of issues discussed in this study. There were forty workers in total, all male, and all permanent employees of the council, most for quite a long period of time. For one team leader this had been his one and only place of work since arriving in Australia thirty years ago. Of the fifteen workers interviewed as part of this study, their average period of work in the council was twelve years, and their average age, forty-eight. Three were over sixty and another three were in their fifties. Almost a third were born overseas and spoke languages other than English. Most workers had little formal education, usually having left school at fourteen or fifteen years of age, and since leaving school they had been involved in unskilled/labouring work. Three workers had trade qualifications obtained during an era when there were no formal examination requirements. In short, this workforce can be seen to have many of the characteristics of the traditional 'working class'.

Research aims, method and questions

The original aim of this research was to examine the literacy and numeracy practices of operator level council workers. However, in view of the introduction of new workplace practices in this council, these research aims shifted. While the analysis of literacy and numeracy practices remained important, these became interwoven with the dynamics of the restructuring into competitive teams. In fact, it was not possible to isolate these practices, because to understand the role of literacy and numeracy practices in this new environment it was necessary to also have an understanding of the dynamics of the work context, which in turn has to be seen within the discursive changes involved in the move towards competitive teams.

The study had four main aims:

- To examine the broader discursive (ie cultural) shifts underpinning the move to competitive teams and the correspondingly new worker identities required

- To examine the responses of the workers to competitive teams largely in terms of their accommodation or resistance
- To examine the literacy and numeracy practices involved in working in competitive teams
- To examine the education and training implications of competitive teams for construction and maintenance workers in the council

The initial data collection involved two researchers working over a period of six weeks. This study can be seen as a small-scale ethnographic study because the researchers had the opportunity to experience and document first hand the nature, and hence the culture, of work undertaken by maintenance and construction gangs. The 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of aspects of this workplace culture was obtained by:

- Travelling with both the newly created 'competitive teams' and the traditional work gangs to their sites of work, observing the work gangs undertake projects, making field notes, interviewing workers informally, and in some cases participating in the work at hand.
- Participating in one of the in-house training sessions that all construction and maintenance workers were required to attend during this trial period of introducing competitive teams.
- Independently following up visits to a range of work gangs at their work sites and interviewing individual workers during their 'downtime', that is, times when there was little work required (for example, while waiting for concrete to dry). Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in council trucks, in the researchers' cars, and by the roadside. All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the workers, and the interviews usually lasted from between twenty and thirty minutes. These interviews were later transcribed in full. Interviews were conducted with a total of fifteen workers, two supervisors and the works manager.

In the interviews with workers, questions focused on:

- How workers viewed competitive teams (eg Why is it happening? How has it made your job different or has it made it different? What are the advantages/disadvantages?)
- The role of literacy/numeracy practices in their work (eg What do you have to read/write? What calculations are you required to do?)

- How the workers viewed the training program (eg Was it useful? What did you learn from it? What training have you had in the past? What training do you need/want now?)

Interviews with the manager and supervisors were similar, but dealt more with the broader ideology and aims rather than practice. For example, they were asked: What makes a competitive team? What is the role of language, literacy and numeracy practices in these teams? What is the aim of the training program? What pressures are there to introduce competitive teams? What incentives are there for workers to work differently?

In the interview data that follow the names of all participants have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

A sociocultural approach

In examining literacy and numeracy practices in this workplace context, and in linking these practices with the discursive shifts involved with the introduction of new workplace practices, a paradigm is adopted that can best be described as 'sociocultural'. In doing so, the influence of recent work by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) is acknowledged. These authors begin their study of the discourse of what they term, the 'new work order', with an explanation of a sociocultural approach. They explain that language and literacy (and by implication, numeracy) can only be understood 'when situated in their social and cultural settings' and that this should include as well, society's 'work order' (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996:1), a term which will be explained in the next section.

This sociocultural approach to literacy has been termed 'the new literacy studies' (Gee, 1990; Street, 1993). It presents a 'social' as distinct from the traditional 'psychological' paradigm. Thus, literacy, rather than being seen as a neutral package of decontextualised skills (ie an 'autonomous' model of literacy) instead is seen in its relationship to social context. A sociocultural approach reveals what literacy means to people and how it is used in many local communities and contexts with a focus on 'social practices' rather than 'skills' (Baker & Luke, 1991; Barton, 1994; Barton and Ivanic, 1991; Baynham, 1995; Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic, 1994; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Gee, 1990; Heath, 1983, 1986; Lankshear et al, 1997; Levine, 1986; Street, 1984, 1993; Szwed, 1981).

To date, there have been relatively few sociocultural studies of literacy in the workplace. It necessarily involves some understanding of the 'culture' of the workplace, and if the aim is to examine how workers perceive the role of

literacy practices, then ideally the research method should include an ethnographic component. Thus, researchers need to work closely with workers over a longer period of time, often involving participant observation, if they are to understand the fuller meaning of literacy practices in work contexts. This is the approach taken in overseas studies by Darrah (1992) and Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) in their work with electronics assembly workers; Gowen (1992) with hospital workers; Hull (1993) with banking employees; and Hart-Landsberg and Reder (1995) with workers in an automotive parts manufacturing company. In a limited way, it is also the approach taken in this study of local council maintenance and construction workers.

Viewing literacy and workplace practices from the perspectives of the workers, however, can be problematic. 'Hearing other voices' may not be popular if these voices conflict with the dominant discourses on literacy which represent particular corporate and managerial interests (Hull, 1993). This is precisely the point Foley (1994, 1997) makes, though not in reference to literacy as such, but to recent 'restructuring' (or what Foley prefers to call 'capitalist reorganisation'). Foley (1994) calls for educators to pay attention to what workers are actually experiencing and learning because only in this way will the 'contradictory and contested dynamics of workplace relations' be explored in any depth. Again, in a limited way, this current study of local council workers lends support to such a call.

2. DISCOURSES OF 'THE NEW WORK ORDER', TEAMWORK AND LITERACY PRACTICES

The main focus in this study is the introduction of what are referred to as 'competitive teams' and their implications in a local council. However, before considering the specifics of this focus it is important to provide a background picture with some current thinking on 'the new work order'.

The introduction of competitive teams in this local council did not just result from the ideas of an enterprising manager. While he did have a key role, and while for the workers on the ground it may have appeared that it was all the manager's work, there is more to it. In fact, the introduction of new workplace practices including teamwork should have been no surprise given the rate of change currently prevailing in management practices in the general community (see Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills [Karpin], 1995) and public sector management in particular (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). It is this rate of change that needs now to be considered.

The new work order

The nature of work in the western world has been changing rapidly for the past few decades. These changes have brought forth a plethora of different theories, descriptions and terminology, often associated with the changing nature of capitalism. For example, there have been accounts of late capitalism (Mandel, 1975), disorganised capitalism (Lash & Urry, 1987; Offe, 1985), consumer capitalism (Baudrillard, 1981), capitalist reorganisation (Foley, 1994), fast capitalism (Gee & Lankshear, 1995) new capitalism (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) and even post-capitalism (Drucker, 1993). In addition, this period of rapid change has variously been referred to as new times (Hall & Jacques, 1990), post-fordist, postmodern (Harvey, 1989), post-industrial (Block, 1990), and more recently, the new work order (Gee & Lankshear, 1995; Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). These terms do not all mean the same thing, but they do all describe societal changes that affect the way work is organised and conducted and the increased pace of these changes over the past few decades.

For the most part in the discussions that follow these changes are referred to interchangeably as 'the new work order' and 'new capitalism' in recognition

of the influence on this research study of the recent work by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996).

The changes referred to in terms such as the new work order have resulted in heightened global competition (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Best, 1990; Porter, 1990), a new global capitalism involving continuous efforts to capture new markets with ever increasing competition (hypercompetition). As markets for mass-products have become saturated, enterprises increasingly have found it necessary to produce high quality goods for specialised markets globally, requiring increased flexibility in production (Harvey, 1990; Piore & Sabel, 1984; Wood, 1989). Creating and seeking new specialist markets requires rapid changes in production techniques, and due to intense global competition, production costs need to be kept to the minimum. As a result, enterprises have been forced to continually restructure (transform) their workplaces with the introduction of new technology and in particular, computerisation, and the introduction of new workplace practices designed to maximise the productivity of the workforce.

According to the discourse, this new work order requires a new relationship between capital and labour. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) explain that, under the old 'Fordist' model of mass production, workers were employed essentially 'from the neck down'. Increasingly, they explain, this is no longer the case. To reduce labour costs and to maximise the productivity of existing workers, enterprises seek 'knowledge workers'. They want workers to think more about their work, to work smarter, take responsibility for their work, and make decisions in the interests of the enterprise (Buggy, 1991). In the new work order, workers have no need to be told (ordered) what to do by supervisors; they organise their own work, often as part of a work team. In fact, supervisors and a whole section of middle management are often no longer required:

The logic of the new work order is that the roles and responsibilities of the middle will pass to the front-line workers themselves (formerly the bottom of the hierarchy). Workers will be transformed into committed 'partners' who engage in meaningful work, fully understand and control their jobs, supervise themselves, and actively seek to improve their performance through communicating clearly their knowledge and needs (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996:29).

The 'greatest challenge' facing capitalist enterprises, however, concerns how they can effect this shift on the part of workers, involving not only workers working 'smarter', but being motivated and totally committed to the core values and goals of the enterprise or the project at hand. Instead of working just for a wage, workers are expected to find meaning in their work and thus be prepared to work harder and for longer hours. For a great many workers

it requires a new social identity which may not be easy to attain:

Workers trained in the old capitalism may have a very hard time adapting or changing their values and their attitude toward work and workplaces. In fact, there is the danger of widespread cynicism in the workforce, based on the idea that fast capitalist practices are meant to 'dupe' the worker into working harder and longer for less reward - or at least with greater risk - in the service of elites who still formulate the basic vision in their own interests (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996:31).

Such an argument, explain Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996:31), is why capitalist interests emphasise bringing about change in schools and thereby changing the values and attitudes of 'tomorrow's workers'. Interestingly, they explain in some detail recent attempts at aligning schooling with the new capitalism through classroom practices based on cognitive science. The aim of these practices is to enable students to internalise particular core values and goals thus facilitating the development of compliant workers of the future (pp 49-72) so they will be unlike the workers of the 'old capitalism' who carry cultural 'baggage' which is likely to hinder the development of new social identities.

Discourses

It is through discourses that this change in workers, to bring about commitment to the goals and vision of the enterprise (ie 'the greatest challenge'), is accomplished. Gee (1990) explains that discourses (which he always identifies with a capital D to differentiate them from the other meaning of discourses, a stretch of spoken or written language) are ways of thinking, believing, acting, interacting, speaking, listening, and valuing at appropriate times and places with appropriate objects in order to signal membership in a particular social group. Discourses are the means by which people are socialised into how they see the world, what they believe in, how they act. They are inherently ideological and involve the exercise of power. According to Foucault (1984), discourse is the power which is to be seized, and it is through control over the discourses of the new capitalism that capitalist enterprises are able to wield so much power over their workers. But this power, through discourses, can be exercised in such a way that workers may be less likely to resist it, because it seems to represent common sense (see Fairclough, 1989; Lemke, 1995). The discourses of the new capitalism, represented for example, in the myriad training manuals and business management texts (eg Peters 1992, 1994), present changing workplace practices as the natural consequence of progress. Thus, it makes sense that, due to increasing competition, workers should work collaboratively in teams, and thereby become more efficient; it makes sense

that frontline workers should assume more responsibility for their work and that their work in turn will become more meaningful. Workers may well welcome the opportunity of a shift from the alienated workplace of the Fordist assembly line to working collaboratively with management in a so-called 'enchanted workplace'. And so natural and progressive might the process be that the ideology underpinning the discourse is effectively hidden.

Gee and Lankshear (1995) draw attention to the 'fast capitalist texts' in the discourses of the new capitalism which are promoted in the many management manuals which announce this new 'enchanted workplace'. Key words such as empowerment, self-direction, liberation, partnership, and collaboration are used to articulate the vision of a new work order. They explain that these are 'socially contested words'; they can mean different things to different people. For example, notions of empowerment, self direction and liberation, as promoted in recent management manuals, are likely to mean something different when used by liberatory educators such as Freire (Gee & Lankshear, 1995:12). To a large extent 'fast capitalist texts' have co-opted the language of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, thus making them more difficult to contest. Gee and Lankshear (1995:12), therefore, call for deeper debate and dialogue over the values and 'ideological loadings' that are at stake in these discourses.

There are, however, as might be expected, significant contradictions in the discourses of the new work order. Workers are expected to be self directed, to work autonomously, to be empowered to critique their work with a view to increasing efficiency and productivity, but only within parameters established by the enterprise. Newly empowered workers are not expected to criticise the goals of the enterprise or corporation. They are not expected to have a role in decisions involving, for example, 'job tenure' or whether or not to 'downsize' or go 'offshore' (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996:35). But so dominating is the discourse, involving such total commitment to the core values and vision of the enterprise, that such criticism may be unlikely. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:20) cite Champy (1995) to illustrate some of the elements of this new discourse that might be used by enterprises to motivate people to work with such commitment. They include: a focus on leadership that articulates reasons why the business must act in particular ways; and the notion that 'everyone must be a leader and ask questions'. Similarly, Boyett and Conn (1991:113-4) suggest: make people feel like champions (the way Apple computer does); give people a mission (such as 'changing the world'); empower people through involvement; be frank and open about the company's business strategy and direction; trust people to do the right thing; and create a unique culture and indoctrinate people from the start to that culture (and 'if someone doesn't act in concert with the vision, express your

disappointment and encourage him or her to change or leave').

The important point to be made by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:21) is that the ideology of the new capitalism cannot rest on profit alone; this is insufficient to motivate workers to commit themselves 'over the top'. Instead, the focus must be on identification with the core values and vision of the enterprise. Thus, the vision statements of enterprises assume particular significance. Pharmaceutical companies, for example, are seen to exist, among other reasons, 'to alleviate pain and disease', and a tobacco company might in their vision statements defend the right to personal freedom of choice. According to Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:22), discourses of the new capitalism are an attempt 'to create new kinds of people by changing not just their overt viewpoints but their actual practices: to 're-engineer' people in its image'.

Teamwork and literacy practices

Teamwork is an integral part of the discourse of the new work order. A recent industry training manual focusing specifically on teamwork (National Food Industry Training Council Ltd, 1995) describes the role of teams in the new workplace culture:

Teams now replace the individual decision making processes of management. All workers must now be flexible and responsive to workplace needs. Quality control, production control and team leadership are shared amongst all workers (p.x).

According to this same training manual working in teams leads to increased productivity because employees:

- increase their skills as they work as team members
- have a greater sense of belonging and commitment
- are more motivated
- have increased job fulfilment
- can participate, contribute and collaborate in the way work is performed as every worker is seen to have something to offer (p.xi)

This new team environment involves employees meeting together, and the communicative relations between employees within an enterprise are

necessarily different from the traditional 'top-down' model:

Communication patterns and structures in the workplace are now both vertical and horizontal. For example employees from different levels come together to discuss work related issues in vertical meetings and people involved in the same or related activities come together to discuss the day to day organisation of work in horizontal meetings (p.x).

Working in teams therefore can involve extensive spoken, written and non-verbal communication in a range of different contexts with different audiences and for different purposes.

Literacy and numeracy practices in particular are seen to be a major aspect of working in teams. One report of textile workers, for example, indicates that working in teams involves tasks such as attending meetings and taking notes, reading minutes and memos, and writing reports of team progress. The report also states that these practices need to be integrated with good spoken English, enabling workers in meetings to express their views clearly to a range of employees (Baylis, Caldwell & Nussbaum, 1991).

In a 'high performance' production model in a manufacturing plant involving teamwork Hart-Landsberg and Reder (1995) analysed the role of literacy practices. They found that literacy practices and teamwork were 'inextricably related' (p.1031). Interestingly, though, they found that workers who lacked command of particular literacy practices were not necessarily a weakness to a team because they were often supported by other workers, that is, the performance of the team as a whole was paramount:

Literacy was a fundamentally collaborative enterprise that served workers in their coordination of complex production processes. Just as a shared repertoire of literacy practices can propel teamwork, lack of such a shared repertoire can retard teamwork. On the one hand, when tasks are highly cooperative, one worker with an inadequate grasp of the practices can bring the whole group down. On the other hand, in such a situation, all players have a built-in incentive - their own success - to teach the one who needs to learn. Thus, the relationships between teamwork and literacy spiral, as one influences the other to more or less success, depending on the dynamics of the particular situation (Hart-Landsberg & Reder, 1995:1035).

Gee, Hull & Lankshear (1996) similarly, in an ethnographic study of teams of workers in an electronics assembly plant, analysed the informal dynamics of teamwork, looking in particular at literacy and numeracy practices. They found that workers in teams were indeed required to undertake many literacy-related activities, but in addition to these, they also conceived of

themselves differently as workers:

... not only were handloaders expected to be quick and accurate at their work, they were also, with the advent of teams and new systems of reporting and monitoring, supposed to conceptualise their work differently. They were now to include as part of it an understanding of goals, goal-setting, calculations, and reports, with all the literate acts these activities entail (p.119).

These workers needed to think about their work, monitor and reflect on their performance; ie become new knowledge workers. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) point out, however, that despite the appearance of self-direction, when it came to more significant decision-making, it was nevertheless management that took responsibility and gave little opportunity for workers to do so.

The issue of the abilities of existing workers to manage literacy practices in this new capitalism is clearly a vexed one. As Hart-Landsberg and Reder (1995:1031) demonstrate, some workers with an inadequate grasp of literacy practices can be supported by fellow workers, and as Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) reinforce, the informal dynamics of teamwork are such that while there are additional oral and literacy/numeracy demands, workers with a range of oral and literacy abilities in English can be accommodated. For example, often the person in the team with the best command of these literacy practices does most of the written reports and the person with the best spoken English may undertake much of the negotiation with supervisors or lead team meetings.

But despite these accommodations in individual workplaces, from the point of view of employers it is usually preferable that no literacy/numeracy support is needed in the first place, and this tends to be increasingly taken into account in current recruiting practices, especially in so-called 'leading edge' companies where 'higher order' literacies are demanded (Levett & Lankshear, 1994).

The underlying human capital theory

In examining the role of literacy practices in the new work order, and especially in relation to teamwork in this local council context, it is important to briefly outline the bigger picture, to show where this local council context fits, or perhaps does not fit, in the prevailing discourses on literacy practices in the workplace.

The importance of literacy in the restructured workplaces of the new work

order has been highlighted throughout the past decade in Australia. The federal government and elites from industry and unions have worked in concert to promote and develop the skills of the Australian workforce, and literacy (and language) has been seen to be an integral part of this. This 'corporatist' approach involving all the major players in the economy (industry, unions and the state, see Lingard, 1993; Sachs, 1991) has resulted in a national approach towards language and literacy issues with the publication of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (the ALLP; see DEET, 1991a). In this policy, language and literacy are seen to be 'central to the education, training and skill formation necessary to produce a more dynamic and internationally competitive Australian economy' (DEET, 1991b:xiv). This policy perspective is indicative of a revived human capital theory (eg Marginson, 1993:31-53; Porter, 1993:37-40) in which national economic success is seen to be determined largely by the extent of investment in the education and training of the nation's 'human resources'. It is important to stress that this human capital theory has not just affected Australia, but developed nations generally in recent years (OECD, 1992, 1995).

Two key features of the ALLP can be related to the local council context of this present study: literacy programs for 'jobseekers', and Workplace English Language and Literacy Programs (WELL). The first of these, literacy programs for jobseekers, was deemed essential from the time of the release of the ALLP because Australia was in the midst of a recession with close to a million people unemployed. A great many of these people were low skilled and low literacy was, and is to this day, presented as a significant causal factor in their unemployed status (DEET 1991b; Kemp, 1997). On closer analysis, however, the situation is more complex. Literacy skills may represent part of one side of the equation, but only if we are referring to 'structural unemployment', that is, unemployment caused by a mismatch between the supply and demand for particular work skills (see Hussain, 1981:170). In fact, the real problem is the lack of jobs available generally (ie 'aggregate' unemployment). This can be related largely to the effects of global competition which are driving many enterprises overseas in pursuit of cheaper unskilled labour; additionally, the jobs traditionally undertaken by lower skilled workers in this country are fast disappearing. But the federal government's response to high unemployment has been to focus largely on the 'structural' side, the lack of skills, and especially literacy skills, of jobseekers, which is an effective political mechanism for deflecting responsibility for macro-economic factors (Black, 1995a, 1995b).

But regardless of the politics of these programs, the continuing existence of a large pool of unemployed people (and especially long term unemployed) who lack formal education, and who have previously undertaken largely

unskilled work, adds greatly to the anxiety and insecurity of the older council workers in this present study who fit the same vocational profile. There are few other work options available for these council workers and many of them know that if their work in the council finishes, so too do their own working lives.

The WELL program can also be related to this current study. Federal government WELL funds provide language and literacy support for a wide range of enterprises, and many of these are restructuring as part of the national training reform agenda. The program is based on the assumption that many workers cannot effectively manage the language and literacy practices involved in the introduction of new technology and new workplace practices, and in the training now seen as a requisite feature of work in many industries/enterprises. Almost without exception government reports of WELL funded programs indicate that a successful focus on language and literacy in the workplace leads directly to increased productivity and cost savings for the enterprises involved (eg DEET, 1994, 1995a; DEETYA, 1996). Given this dominant federal government perspective, and hence the continuation of WELL funding in 1996/7, despite a change of federal government, managers of enterprises, including local councils, are quite likely to take on the discourse and see the need for their workers to improve their literacy ability in order that their enterprises can work more efficiently and productively.

Only occasionally in the literature on literacy and vocational education are there attempts to present a critical picture of the relationship between literacy and the economy. Gee (1990:138), for example, explains that turning literacy into a 'commodity' and relating it to jobs and profits is a 'master myth' which serves as part of a social theory to advantage some groups against others. Other researchers have explained that literacy 'crises' occur periodically and seem to be related to poor economic conditions or other significant political, demographic or technological changes (see Green, Hodgins & Luke, 1994). In other words, these crises, which usually claim a 'slide' in literacy standards, are 'invented' as a means of shifting responsibility or for locating the 'blame' for difficult social and economic times (see Freebody & Welch, 1993).

Researchers have also indicated, partly in response to the new focus on 'skill formation', that there are still many relatively unskilled jobs to be found in unreformed Fordist-type workplaces, and these do not necessarily involve higher order literacy practices (see Black, 1995a; Luke 1992; Rubenson, 1989; Street, 1990). Furthermore, the fastest growing employment sector in Australia is the low skilled service industry (DEET, 1991c, 1995b). Nevertheless, even allowing for these trends, there is an almost universal

belief in the job market that higher order literacy abilities are essential for today's jobs, and especially in restructured workplaces that involve teamwork. As this study will indicate, this is a belief of management in this local council context.

For the most part, the following sections of this study draw on transcriptions of interviews with the manager, supervisors and a range of workers involved in the maintenance and construction areas of the local council outlined earlier. In examining the cultural shifts and the role of literacy/numeracy practices, links will be made to aspects of the foregoing discussions on the 'new work order'.

3. 'COMPETITIVE TEAMS': DIFFERENT MEANINGS FROM THE FIELD

Discussion has already touched on the concept of 'teamwork'. In this local council context the manager and supervisors agreed to introduce 'competitive teams'. According to one of the supervisors: 'it's just an idea that was thrown around in one of the supervisors' meetings ... David (manager) just said, we'll go for it'.

'Gangs' did not become 'teams' overnight, however. As indicated earlier, a training program was established partly to explain the situation to the workers. It was also decided to introduce competitive teams in phases, beginning with a trial period of just over six months. This involved in total approximately fifteen workers. The remaining workers (twenty-five) continued their work in the traditional manner, except that the 'gangers' were expected to be more accountable for keeping track of costs - there was slightly more paper work than before. The 'team leaders' for these new competitive teams were specially selected by interview and they in turn selected willing team members. But as indicated earlier, only the team leaders received additional pay.

In order to ensure clarity, I will refer to 'teams', being the competitive teams, and 'gangs', being the traditional work gangs. There is the potential for confusion, however, because most workers continued, regardless of whether they were in a 'team' or a 'gang', to make reference to 'the ganger' and 'the gang'. It was going to take a while before the new nomenclature of 'teamwork' took hold with all workers.

Despite the training program and the phasing-in of competitive teams, there appeared to be some confusion over what a 'competitive team' really was. Everyone had a broad conceptual understanding, but there were some shifts in emphasis. With all our respondents we asked some questions along the lines of: What is a competitive team? or What makes a competitive team different (from a traditional work gang)?

Competing against private enterprise

The word 'competitive' needs first to be considered. Most of the workers interviewed had an understanding of competing against private enterprise. One of the supervisors, Tony, was quite specific:

... competitive teams know they are competing against private enterprise so that ... what they do has to be up to scratch otherwise they won't survive ...

In fact, at this stage they were not competing against private enterprise directly - the competition was mythical in the sense that they did not have to tender for jobs in competition with anyone. They were really being asked to cost their work carefully, establish 'benchmarks', and work 'efficiently' because there was 'potential' competition from private enterprise. If their costs could not be demonstrated to be on a par with private enterprise, then they would be considered uncompetitive and eventually the council would decide to go with the private contractors instead.

The word 'competitive', however, seemed also to have a more general meaning. The manager, David, for example, stated: '... we've sown the seed now, the competition, of efficiency ...'. For him, competition and efficiency were equated. Tony, a supervisor, similarly linked the word 'competitive' with a new way of working dictated by efficiency, by economic imperatives:

... just by pure necessity ... the competitive team now, the whole new concept is there, being competitive rather than just to do the job that needs to be done ... They do it competitively, they know they've got a time restraint, they know they've got money restraints, they do it on their sheets, they see the costs of each day ...

This aspect of the discourse of the new work order appeared to be accepted unquestionably by most of the council workforce. The world of work had changed and the word 'competitive' had become a catch-phrase synonymous with working more efficiently, and probably harder, and as we will see, smarter, and all within a framework of having to 'win' against private contractors.

Competing against each other

But there was another meaning to competitive. In the case of the two maintenance teams, they appeared to be in competition with each other. This was unfortunate and not planned, but it was nevertheless an issue. After establishing the two maintenance teams they were then assigned work that differed from the usual 'maintenance' work in the council. Most of their jobs now involved concreting fairly lengthy sections of footpaths in contrast to the usual maintenance work which involved moving around a designated area within the council boundaries checking the drains and undertaking small-scale repairs to concrete slabs and footpaths. The rationale for this

change was to establish 'benchmarks', work standards that could reasonably be expected of a work team, and the most effective way of achieving this was on longer stretches of footpath where work hours could be costed accurately against cubic metres of concrete laid. The make-up of the two maintenance teams helps to explain the potential for problems. One team comprised a young team leader, Mark, aged twenty-nine years, (the youngest man in the depot) and two relatively youthful team members (in their early forties). The other team comprised three men, of whom the team leader, Richard, was in his early sixties, one was in his mid-fifties and the third team member was approaching his mid-sixties. Not surprisingly, the younger team worked with a little more vigour, pouring more concrete than the older team, and in doing so created a sense of competition. As Richard, the team leader of the latter team commented in response to a question on competitive teams:

I think it's a bad word, really ... I don't believe that it's competitive, like, I shouldn't have to compete against Mark, and Mark shouldn't have to compete against me ... I just think they used the wrong word there ... They're coming up with the idea, somebody'll say, oh, you only poured two and a half metres today, Mark done four ... I don't want to know what job Mark's on and whatnot ... I've got enough worries of me own without worrying how fast Mark's going and all the rest of it ...

Implicit in Richard's comments also was the recognition that 'benchmarks' might become inflated, and that everyone might then be required to work to a pace and standard that for some might be uncomfortable. As another worker commented, 'he's (Mark) just overdoing it a little bit ...'

What is a 'team'?

It is not just the word 'competitive' that was problematic, so too was the idea of working in 'teams'. Many of the workers maintained they had always worked as a 'team', in fact, it was difficult not to, with three or four men working together on manual projects every day, travelling in the same council truck, having lunch and 'smokos' together. In the new work order, teamwork is often presented in contrast to the Fordist/Taylorist assembly line model in which factory workers under strict supervision perform largely an alienated, repetitive, individualised work role in a relationship to a machine (see Lacey, 1986; Taylor, 1911; Thompson, 1985). Council field work involving construction and maintenance gangs does not so easily fit this model. Some years ago there may have been a stricter hierarchical structure of authority more in the Fordist/Taylorist mould. For example, Eric, another supervisor, related how, twenty years ago: 'If the ganger told you to dig a hole, you just dug it until he told you to stop sort of thing'. But this is not the situation with modern-day gangs. The ganger is still the key person (as is a

team leader), but the communication between workers is better, and decision-making is shared to some extent. A ganger, Robert, stated:

... like if I get to the point where I get stuck on something, we will confide in each other ... I mean, of course they're going to chip in ... I mean, they're not left in the dark ... it's very hard not to talk work at work ...

But then again, it could be argued that this type of work often does not require much discussion. As another gang member, Terry, stated: 'Oh, I wouldn't say we discuss, we just get in and do it, there's no discussing, we know what we've got to do'. These sentiments were largely echoed by team leader Mark: 'Well, we're all together, you know, I can't stand there and give orders, we're all together, we all know what we're doing'.

It is unlikely that the move to 'competitive teams' made much difference in terms of how the workers interacted with each other. There has always been a high degree of informal interaction (mateship might be an appropriate term here) within gangs, such that gangs consider themselves teams anyway. For them, it just represents a change in nomenclature. For the manager and the supervisors, however, there was more to teamwork than workers working cooperatively and 'talking work at work'. Moreover, working in teams was seen to involve a new way of thinking, a new workplace culture.

4. CHANGING CULTURE: WORKING SMARTER

This section presents the managerial perspective, the expectations in particular of the depot manager and his supervisors who were the ones driving the changes. While one of the supervisors presented the changes as 'just an idea' emanating from one of their meetings, they all had a clear picture of how a competitive team should be operating. Many of the features of the discourse of the new work order outlined earlier in this paper are featured again in the following paragraphs, including: the development of 'knowledge workers'; the need to think differently (smarter); the need to be multiskilled; and the need for 'flexibility' in workplace practices. There was also the suggestion that these council workers might strongly identify with their work in such a way that they become motivated intrinsically through satisfaction with their work as much as they are extrinsically through wages earned at the end of the week.

Knowledge workers: Thinking differently

David, the manager, explained that competitive teams needed to think more about the organisation of their work thereby relieving the supervisors of some of their responsibilities:

... How is the job going to be conducted? How are we going to achieve what we set out to do? And by that we want them to organise, them to come to us to say, we require a backhoe on this particular day for these amount of hours, we require this material, we require a certain number of labourers or specialists or whatever ...

It meant being more responsible and accountable and thinking about the job in hand, which was seen to be in marked contrast to the traditional operation of much of the work gangs. Tony, for example, elaborated on the new financial responsibilities of competitive teams:

We never used to tell them how much money was on the job, we just told them to do the job, we kept an eye on the costing ... Now we tell them how much money they've got to spend on the job, and as they do their costing each day they can see what they're spending, they know how they're going, so they can see the bigger picture now

This is all part of the development of the new knowledge worker, being able to see the bigger picture and identify with the concerns of management and

the enterprise. It also means being more skilled. Tony referred to workers needing to be 'teched up' - 'I mean, we're talking about putting computers in trucks'. But the skills are not just 'technical' skills, they also involve the skills needed to negotiate skilfully with the general public in providing a professional service. For example, at the time of the interviews there were discussions about the skills required for teams to quote their own work:

... and while they're doing their job someone will come up and say, we need a driveway done ... They'll quote the driveway there and then ... Normally the engineer would do that, that's the difference, the difference is they'll have the knowledge and the competence to quote their own work and to know how they're going, it's not the sort of thing that councils normally do ... head down, arse up, keep your mouth shut and do what you're told sort of thing ... (Tony)

While David and Tony could explain the broader picture of the responsibilities and the skills of their new team workers, Eric, another supervisor, was a little more pragmatic. He had spent many years in the council and had a deep understanding of maintenance work and its associated culture. For him, competitive teams were essentially about working smarter, thinking ahead a bit more to eliminate the need for time-wasting trips to and from the depot:

... instead of coming into the depot to pick up their timber and go out and drop their timber off, and come back and pick up a barricade and go and drop barricades off ... We're trying to get them to organise a whole lot before they leave the depot ... See, a contractor wouldn't drive backwards and forwards to home all the time to pick up gear ...

Flexible work practices

Related to Eric's comments and working smarter is the need for greater flexibility in how teams operate depending on the circumstances of a particular job. Traditionally, for example, work gangs have started and finished work at pre-set times regardless of the job. David gave an example of how he would like to see teams operating:

... we want them to have a lot more flexibility, so that they can adapt or carry out their work according to the condition of the site ... To stay on site for an additional half hour to complete the job as opposed to going there the next morning is good thinking ...

David in fact was lamenting the absence of such flexibility ('we're getting more of the negative side of it than the positive'), but interestingly, Eric

related a perfect example of greater flexibility on the part of one team recently:

The other day they rang up, they wanted concrete, they couldn't get it, they wanted it for quarter past eight, and Henry rang back on the two-way and said you can't get it 'till one o'clock or cancel it to the next day ... Now, the ganger involved said, bring it in at seven ... So they came and saw me about starting a bit early ... They came in at quarter past six ... we want them to be like that ...

Being happier in their work

Changes in workplace practices such as the example cited above only happen if teams have a strong commitment to the project at hand. It is this commitment that management wants to foster, but it is very difficult with a traditional workforce that understandably is suspicious of workplace changes.

Some comments that David made suggest that he is looking for signs of greater commitment from his teams. At one point in the interview he said: 'Some people are thinking about their work, but a lot of them just ... *still have to work because they've got to*' (my emphasis). Later in the interview it became clearer what he meant as the following extract from the interview transcript indicates:

First interviewer: What are the incentives for the workers themselves, is it money?

David: The incentive is to be happier in their work, to want to come to work and to want to give their best at work ...

Second interviewer: It's idealistic though

David: It is, but I certainly myself live in that world, and I want to try and get them to do that ... I want them to be part of their own decision making process, their teams ... it's the old theory, if they're happy, they'll show more interest, they'll come up with good ideas, productivity will increase and money will be there, or maybe not money, but reward of some sort of another ... It might be time off, it might be money, it might be just the fact that, you know, they've done that work

David had clearly taken on a key aspect of the discourse of the new work order - ideally workers should enjoy their work; the work itself should

provide sufficient *intrinsic* motivation for them to come to work and commit themselves to that work. It is an ideal he is happy to admit applies to his own work, but as later comments in this study will indicate, it is at odds with the perspectives of quite a number of his workers.

The supervisors do not have any such ideals. In the opening comments Tony makes in his interview, he states:

... the theory behind it (competitive teams) is the men think differently
... Instead of thinking I only get paid to do the job, I just do the job, what they've got to start thinking is, I might get extra if we do the job better, and I might keep my job if we do the job better ...

This reveals a more pragmatic and realistic approach - what is really likely to motivate the workers is extra pay, and ultimately, keeping their job - *extrinsic* motivation of the most basic kind.

The team leader as the linchpin

From observations of the teams at work and from the interviews it was clear that the main focus of change was the team leader (the ganger in traditional parlance). He was the person specially selected by interview and given additional money in his pay packet. According to David this was a deliberate interim strategy in introducing competitive teams:

... the ganger was the first one, we had to start somewhere, so we started at the top of the team and we hope to work our way through the rest of the team ... Now, we wanted to see if the team leader could in fact pick the team up or just reorganise the team so that without doing anything, without working harder, these efficiencies and productivities in fact increased, but we thought the team leader was the linchpin in all this ...

This focus on the team leader appears to be similar to Virgona's (1994) explanation of attempts by management to 'colonise' shop stewards in industry: 'Management's cultural boundaries have stretched to assimilate the shop steward into its network' (Virgona, 1994:133). The team leader, like the shop steward, is a key person in working between the two cultures of management and the workers, and is the key person to win over in attempts to bring about changes in workplace practices:

They are at the site of the power struggle. Their culture, skills and support systems will determine whether they struggle, acquiesce or collude in the balance of power (Virgona, 1994:141).

In the construction and maintenance teams it is the team leader who does the 'paperwork', that is, he completes a job sheet, notes the activity numbers, keeps track of the costings, and does all the ordering for concrete. Only if the team leader is absent would another member of the team assume responsibility for this. In a sense, the picture of teamwork in the maintenance and construction sections of this council at this stage is false because of this focus just on the team leader. It is the team leader who is assuming so much additional responsibility and accountability, not the rest of the team. While the teams seemed to be operating effectively this could be largely because the teams were composed of cooperative men who were prepared to work hard for a team leader who had specifically chosen them. But they themselves had little of the additional responsibilities which you might expect from the ideal of teamwork as outlined in the management manuals. In the later sections of this study the perspectives of these team members are outlined, indicating some of the complexities involved in the operation of competitive teams.

The council as a 'protected' community

Before concluding this section some comments need to be made about public perceptions of the local council work 'culture', and the nature of maintenance and construction work, because both of these aspects have a bearing on the attitude of some of these council workers to new workplace practices such as teamwork and notions of 'working smarter'.

According to one (academic) account, local councils 'can no longer be seen as a "sheltered workshop", protected from the tough world' (Jones, 1989:4). The general public perception also seems to be that local council work is inefficient and 'soft', and some of the interviews reflected this viewpoint. Tony, a supervisor, was particularly harsh in his comments:

... they've been in this protected environment in the council for so long, get in the real world mate, you can't live your lap of luxury all the time, you've got to get out there and get competitive ...

Jones (1989:4) refers to the 'often unpressured staff structures' of local councils. Some of the workers tended to confirm that council work was, at the very least, a bit easier. To some extent council maintenance and construction work was considered pre-retirement work. In the words of one worker: 'I've done my hard work, I just come here now to slow down a bit'. The work may not have been well paid, but it was regular work and it was preferable to working long hours and weekends as a private contractor. It was also the only work available for many of these workers, and several of

them commented that they had tried private work, but when that failed, they fell back on council work.

The depot manager, David, was aware of the difficulties in introducing workplace changes to workers who were older, and in many cases, waiting for retirement. But because the council had decided not to retrench workers he had little option other than to work with his existing workers. Some team leaders also acknowledged that the old culture was unlikely to change markedly until older workers retired.

But this 'old culture' needs to be seen in the full context of the nature of maintenance and construction work in the council. The nature of the job encourages a public perception of slack work, or 'bludging'. Laying concrete necessarily involves periods of 'down-time'. For example, there may be a waiting period for concrete to be delivered in the first place, and once the concrete is in and worked on, it will be followed by another slower period waiting for the concrete to dry.

The public perception is of workers standing around with little work to do. 'Sitting down on the fence like a crow' was how one supervisor put it. Routines such as these have been targeted for change with suggestions that during these 'down-times' gangs should be 'working smarter' by visiting other sites and organising their next job, but it is not always that easy as Eric indicated:

... then when the concrete's in you get a slack period between the floating of it, so you've got to have that time when you stand around a bit, but you can't go away, because if you go away and the concrete goes off, you can lose it and you've got to start again ...

The regular work of the maintenance gangs also encouraged a generally unfocused attitude to work that feeds negative public perceptions. One of the competitive team members recounted his previous work in a maintenance gang: 'Before they'd be jobs ... there might not be jobs, you're sort of sitting around, you're under the eye of everybody'. His team leader also spoke of 'driving around in the truck all day trying to waste time'. He was referring in particular to driving around the municipality checking the drains for litter and blockages.

Thus, the nature of the work under the old culture, at least that involving standing around waiting for concrete to dry or aimlessly driving around looking for drains to clear, encourages public perceptions of 'bludging' and does little also to instil in workers an enthusiasm and commitment to their work.

5. CHANGING LITERACY AND NUMERACY PRACTICES

In an earlier section of this study (pages 10-13) examples were provided of the ways in which the new work order, involving in particular, working in teams, had implications for literacy and numeracy practices. For example, 'higher order' literacies generally have been called for in 'leading edge' companies (Levett & Lankshear, 1994) and literacy practices were found to be 'inextricably related' to teamwork in the 'high performance' company researched by Landsberg and Reder (1996). The question for this study is, what is the role of literacy and numeracy practices in the newly introduced competitive teams in this local council context?

Some contradictions

From the management perspective, David explained that good oral skills in English were essential for competitive team members in communicating with the public:

... both technically and socially, you know, why is this traffic scheme going through the area? In the same conversation, this is why we're using concrete ...

He also saw the need for all team members to have a 'reasonably high level of literacy'.

In talking with the two supervisors, Tony and Eric, however, a rather different picture emerges. As the following rather extended (and slightly edited) extract from the interview with Tony indicates, there are some contradictions involving literacy and numeracy practices in the new teams:

Interviewer: What skills do they need now that they didn't need before?

Tony: Well, they need probably to be more literate

Interviewer: They do?

Tony: Definitely ... and they need ... basic numbers, adding up, and basic multiplication, but we give them a calculator to do that, but if you type into a calculator one times two and you get thirty-six, you've got to know that thirty-six is wrong, so they've got to have a basic knowledge of numeracy and literacy

Interviewer: Do they all need computational skills or just the ganger?

Tony: Only the ganger

Interviewer: And that's the role of the ganger, the responsibility ... and reports?

Tony: They don't need any reports, they are normally incident reports

Interviewer: What happens if the ganger's away?

Tony: I normally do it ... if I know they are not capable of doing it ... The acting gangers that come in when the ganger's away ... he does his time sheets each day, he's makes quite a few mistakes, but basically he's been pretty good, he gets the names down, he puts the hours down, and he breaks them up into basic activities, and he gets them signed, and that's all he's got to do, and if he can do that and measure concrete to order, then he can do the job

Interviewer: And the incident report?

Tony: That normally comes up with Vincent and Vincent generally writes nearly all of them automatically ... Vincent's the cost clerk, but he's in charge of all the incident reports

Interviewer: So, when you're actually employing anybody for the construction gangs you wouldn't really be interested in their literacy and numeracy?

Tony: I wouldn't normally, I don't know what the ad says, I think it says good communication skills, but it's just er

Interviewer: That means to understand you and talk back to you

Tony: And if it was a ganger though, if we were advertising for a ganger we would advertise and say must have good written and oral skills

This interview extract is important for what it reveals about the role of literacy and numeracy practices. Tony starts off acknowledging, just like the manager, David, the importance of literacy, but in elaborating the point it becomes apparent that it is not literacy but numeracy that features more on the job, but it is only a basic knowledge of the calculator that is really required. Tony then acknowledges a point stressed earlier in this study, that it is really only the ganger (team leader) who needs the skills to do the paperwork (literacy/numeracy), and judging from the tasks required, they are indeed basic. And finally, if there is a written report required, there is a cost clerk who does this 'automatically'.

A minimal role for literacy/numeracy

We can conclude from the above transcript that literacy/numeracy practices in most construction and maintenance work are basic, and almost non-existent, and observing the teams at work simply confirmed this. Most team members, just like gang members, only had to sign their time sheet and that was the extent of literacy practices. There was more numeracy required in calculating concrete pours, but this would be done by the ganger, and even if he had some difficulties, he would nevertheless become familiar with the calculations in time. Eric illustrated this:

Well, most of the older gangers just measure, calculate in your mind ... around 100mm (depth), you've only got to multiply the width by the length ... give us three by four is twelve, that's 1.2 (cubic metres), that's four inches (100mm in depth) ... you learn that ...

It was clear from talking to team and gang members that many of them considered they generally had problems in dealing with literacy and/or numeracy practices. This was no surprise given the low level of formal education of most workers, but importantly, it was not likely to affect their job performance as a maintenance/construction worker. Even in circumstances outlined earlier (page 22) when it was explained that competitive teams would have to do their own quotes. One team member, Phil, who acknowledged he had literacy 'problems', explained how he would manage:

Interviewer: But what about costings, just for example, say one of these people (residents) popped out and they said, oh, while you're here, could you give me a quote on fixing up the driveway?

Phil: Oh, yeah, that's easy enough, that's all part of the learning experience of the job, well, you can see how much is going to go in and how much a metre is worth and away you go from there, but as far as giving them the full on written out quote and everything, well, bad luck, this is what it's going to cost you, that's it, you know ... people seem to be OK with that

Interviewer: And you'd get the supervisors to confirm it would you?

Phil: Oh, yeah, they'd have to go through the council, yeah, because you've got to get it passed ...

Construction team leaders are different

There were two types of competitive teams established: maintenance and construction. It was the latter that worked on larger, more complex projects such as roundabouts and laneways. Before concluding this section it is important to differentiate again the role of the team leaders from team members, and especially in relation to the construction teams. As we have indicated, most maintenance and construction work involves few literacy/numeracy practices, and those that are involved are quite basic, but the role of construction team leaders provides an exception.

Due to the more complex work of the construction teams, the technical skills of their two team leaders necessarily exceeds those of the maintenance teams. Both construction team leaders had undertaken tertiary qualifications, and one of them had some overseas qualifications in engineering. Their literacy and numeracy ability had to be appropriate for their work. At one point in an interview with Victor, one of the construction team leaders, we were interrupted by the supervisor who wanted to explain their next job. The following dialogue provides some indication of the integration of literacy/numeracy practices with engineering knowledge required by this team leader.

Tony: Hello Victor, your next job

Victor: Thank you ... see I got another plan

Tony: I'll tell you what it is before we go (Tony unfolds the plan and explains) This is that um, the pit, the stormwater pit I told you about ... it's actually a road reserve, but it's only a footpath ... grass, there's a footpath in there ... into an existing line, and we're going to build this structure here, which is two point two, roughly two point two by two point two, right, with a grate one point six by, what, about point eight ... this is er a suspended slab, so when we form it up we'll get a steel frame here with a cross member in here, we'll put a compressed fibro in here ... pour a suspended slab in there and the fitters are going to make up this grate here and we have to put a trash rack in here and like I say this is the existing lines, it'll break into existing lines, OK ... I've already started to arrange getting this grate made up ... When do you think this'll be finished (current job)

Victor: Probably Monday, Tuesday

The level of skills implicit in this dialogue is far in excess of those required of team members in the day to day work of construction and maintenance teams. Victor needed to be 'teched up' sufficiently to be able to read complex

plans involving a lot of embedded literacy and numeracy practices. Thus, while for the team members in both construction and maintenance teams most of the work is low-skilled requiring only minimal literacy and numeracy ability, this is not the case for the two construction team leaders.

6. DISENCHANTMENT AND RESISTANCE

So far in this research study the perspectives presented have been largely those of the manager and his supervisors, and not surprisingly, they have promoted the discourse of the new work order. It was explained, for example, how 'competition' is driving the agendas; how workers are now expected to become 'knowledge workers' who 'think differently'; how they should become 'multiskilled' (ie 'teched up'), 'work smarter', and become more 'flexible' in their work arrangements. It was also suggested they might become 'happier' in their work, and thus come up with good ideas that would lead to increased productivity. These are all in accord with the discourse of the new work order found in current management manuals and outlined in the work of Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996).

However, some contradictions in this discourse as it is applied in this local council have also become apparent. For example, it has been explained how the word 'competition' has taken on alternative meanings for some workers. And how some of the rhetoric of the new workplace culture has been exposed for what it is, idealism, which may be unlikely to have real application to workplace practices. And are these teams of workers really likely to be so self directed and happy with their work that this is sufficient motivation for them to work 'over the top' for the council, or is the bottom line always extra pay and ultimately holding on to their jobs?

The issue of literacy and numeracy practices has also demonstrated contradictions. A feature of discourses of the new work order is the need to manage higher levels of literacy practices (as knowledge workers), and as we have seen, this was promoted in competitive teams by the manager and to some extent by one supervisor. But, by the same token, there was also clear evidence that literacy and numeracy practices played only a minor role in most of the work of maintenance and construction teams or gangs. Even allowing for the fact that competitive teams had only just been introduced and the main focus of change was the team leader rather than the team members, it is nevertheless difficult to see a significant role for literacy and numeracy practices involving all team and gang members, given the nature of much of the maintenance and construction work.

This section goes further in exposing (or deconstructing) the discourse of the new work order as it is applied in this council context. It presents alternative perspectives from a range of workers, an alternative discourse of resistance.

Working harder

The manager and both supervisors avoided suggesting that workers needed to work harder in competitive teams. Their line was always that they wanted workers only to work smarter. But this was not how many of the workers read the situation.

To a large extent, because the competitive maintenance teams were working mainly on constructing footpaths, often of some considerable length, the work clearly was harder. The traditional maintenance gangs spent much of their time moving from one small job to another undertaking small slab repair work or checking and clearing drains. But the footpath work of the competitive teams was continuous involving quite large concrete pours each day, sometimes over several weeks, with no slack times in between, and therefore the work was considered harder. As team leader, Richard explained:

This one here we'll pour about three cubic metres of concrete and we'll rub that up, and probably have it finished by lunchtime, so the next two hours you'll be setting it up for the next day ... we're going all the time now whereas before you weren't ... we had to maintain the drains ... You might drive around, you might look at fifty drains, but only five of them are dirty, but to do that fifty you're probably looking at two hours just sitting in a truck just driving along checking out the drains ...

Some of the older workers who had been with the council for some years also had a historical perspective which provided them with evidence that the council really was trying to get them to work harder. At one time there had been 140 construction and maintenance workers, now there were less than 40, and yet there was just as much work to be done.

There's no incentive

As explained earlier, during this trial period it was only the team leaders not the team members who were paid more for working in competitive teams, but the implications of this need to be seen in the context of the above view that team members were working harder now. According to one team member, paying extra money to the team leader was nothing more than an attempt to 'bribe one man':

... that's the trouble, they don't want to reward you for anything ... More out of you and nothing reward, so, no incentive ... it's bribery as far as I'm concerned ... bribe one man to get the best out of the rest.

Such comments need to be seen in relation to the manager's remarks cited earlier (on page 24) that through focusing on the team leader only and paying him more, the aim was to see if the team leader could 'pick the team up'. For the manager the issue was one of team leadership, for some workers, it was 'bribery'.

Lack of monetary reward was the single most significant grievance for workers in competitive teams. It was seen as an injustice that confirmed in their minds that the council simply wanted them to work harder for no additional reward.

In practice, the team leaders were put in a difficult position. They were being paid more and were expected to deliver in terms of greater productivity, but in some cases they had an embittered team, despite the fact that they had a role in selecting their team. It was difficult pushing their teams if there was nothing extra to offer them. One team leader, Sergio, put this rather bluntly:

 Blokes here still get the same money, that's why I say, can't push them work hard, (they) say, get fucked ... council don't give them nothing ...

In this workplace culture the bottom line is always money. It is difficult to get intrinsic satisfaction from the hard and repetitive manual work undertaken by these teams. As one former bricklayer, Alfred, said: 'all my life I got paid piecework ... What I laid I got paid'. For him, extra work entailed extra pay, although officially of course, it was not extra work but working smarter.

Some workers did outline how they thought the system could work, a system that would encourage them to work harder. Alfred, again, made one suggestion:

 Now if they said to us do that job, say \$40,000 ... And we do it for 35 ... If they took \$2,500 and gave us \$2,500 as a bonus, that means we'd all be a lot more keener to do it ... but the council wouldn't entertain the idea ...

According to Eddie, a maintenance team worker, at one time the team did win a tender for a job and they came out of it at a good price, but rather than pay the men extra, management's view was: 'well, if they can do it that way they can do it on their normal wages'. The team had proven it was competitive, but again there were no incentives for the workers to do anything extra.

There was certainly discontent from some workers over team leaders being paid more, while appearing not to be doing any more work than the rest of

the team (notwithstanding some additional 'paperwork'). The disparity on pay and thus the perceived injustice was affecting the atmosphere of the workplace, the way workers interacted with each other, often giving way to petty disputes:

Attitude I think... it's a tremendous amount to do with attitude ... When I first come here we used to have a laugh and a joke, you know, how are you going, they all did their work, still doing their work, but the whingers are there ... see what he's getting, he's getting this ... Some get pay rises others don't, and you find a lot of times the ones who are getting pay rises, to my way of thinking, shouldn't be ... there are others doing work ... the system is just wrong (Michael).

What value for the ratepayers' dollar?

Coupled with the perception that council was making them work harder was the view that the council had its priorities wrong and was allowing basic services like maintaining its drainage system, including kerbs and gutters, to get run down. These workers could see a deterioration in the service provided by council, and this coincided with their loss of workforce numbers from 140 some years ago to less than 40 currently. It simply was not possible for the existing workers to maintain the drainage system properly. During the interview with Eddie, for example, he pointed out some guttering in need of work there in front of us:

Once upon a time it would get fixed up, but now it's just left there until someone complains about it ... There's thousands of yards of this to be done around the area, you know, they'll never get on top of it.

It was this 'complaints-driven' philosophy that concerned Richard, also, because he could see the place going to 'rack and ruin':

... well that's why the place is going to rack and ruin ... You can't expect 40 people to do the work of 140 ... they say use your own initiative and whatnot, but then, we got quite a few slabs the next street down, we got a complaint, there were three slabs, but over on the other side of the road there'd have been forty three, and the woman says, when are you going to do these over here, and I said, well all I've got is a ticket here ... And I says, you know, I'll mention it ... Anyway I mentioned it to the boss ... no, haven't got any money at the moment, wait until somebody complains ...

These workers appeared genuinely concerned that the basic services the council offers are declining. Some of them also live in the area, so they are at the same time ratepayers concerned for their ratepaying dollars. In the words

of one worker: 'I live here, I pay rates here, and I've just seen my rates go boom, boom, boom'. He then went on to list the activities the council was getting into, so-called 'welfare delivery' services including childminding and a series of other heavily subsidised activities:

Councils are to me, to look after the roads, footpaths, and look after their drainage, but they've gone right away from that, it's just got out of hand ... They're a business ... you can't run a council I don't believe as a business, because somewhere along the line something suffers, they're not supposed to be profit making ... cut this, cut this here, but you never see their rates being cut ...

Interestingly, at the time of these interviews, the issue of the maintenance of basic services in local councils was highlighted in the press. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 3, 1996) ran a one-page spread entitled 'The road to ruin'. It began: 'cash-strapped councils are losing the battle to maintain basic services such as roads, pavements, kerbs and stormwater drains'. While the story was not based on the council under consideration in this study, the issues it looked at reflect the same community concerns expressed above by the council maintenance workers.

The issue of the use of contractors was necessarily a vexed one. According to one ganger, Robert, the council was moving in the wrong direction in the work it was organising for its competitive teams. It was the longer concreting jobs such as footpaths that should be going to the contractors while council should concentrate on all the complaints, involving relatively minor drainage work. He had a two-fold justification for this. First, it would more directly meet the needs of ratepayers by directing more public resources to complaints. Second, there was the difficulty he perceived in costing traditional maintenance work such as cleaning drains. Every drain was different and workers never knew until they got to a job just how long it would take to put right: 'it's taken all day to clean two drains, another day you'll have ten ... it's a very hard thing to put a cost on'. At the time when Robert was being interviewed his gang had spent some considerable time simply trying to locate a sewerage/drainage smell in the area. It involved knocking on front doors to get permission to explore back yards. On his job sheet for the day showing area worked it would indicate nil. This was an 'uncompetitive' day by all accounts, but there was no other way to undertake the job of locating the source of the smell. It was certainly not the sort of work Robert considered contractors should do.

Generally, these council workers had little time for contractors. Due to the profit motive they considered contractors would have insufficient concern for doing the job right in the interests of ratepayers. Instead, contractors were

seen to be only interested in getting the job done quickly, and then taking the money. There were so many short-cuts in this type of work that could be exploited for profit:

... the work's not up to standard, they're shonking on this ... Where we, if we're doing a footpath, it's three inches deep, if it's a driveway it's six inches deep, because it'll last a length of time ... I've seen contractors walk in here, and they get away with an inch and a half of concrete over the top of roots, where the council fellas at least go to the trouble of digging down and get this fixed ...

Contractors were seen to be less likely to come back to fix a job that should have been done correctly the first time and less concerned with safety matters. The manager, David, acknowledged that safety consciousness was a positive factor for council workers and that it could be compromised with the use of contractors, which was one reason for trying to fend off contractors through having a 'competitive' council workforce.

With their opposition to private contractors and previous comments about the deterioration of the local public infrastructure, the perspectives of these workers can be seen within a broader, public policy context in Australia. They are reflective of trends that are a part of the general shift from a 'welfare state' to a 'competition state' in which the public sector is seen not to be about the delivery of public values but about the management of scarce resources (Yeatman, 1993. See also Cerny, 1990; Yeatman, 1990). For the workers in this study, their work had a 'use value' in the community. If it was privatised this useful public service would become instead a 'commodity' to be sold for profit (see Fairclough, 1992:207-215). Privatisation represented for them the commodification of their work for just a dollar value. Contractors would inevitably take short cuts in order to make a profit. Of course, these workers also had a strong vested interest in retaining their jobs against competition from private contractors, but from comments the workers made in the interviews, this was not just their motive as indicated by Robert (above) who suggested that the longer stretches of concreting could be undertaken by private contractors. This was because this work can be accurately quantified in terms of their costs (and thus commodified), leaving the complaints-driven maintenance work to existing council staff.

Disenchantment and cynicism

The social dynamics of this local council's maintenance and construction workforce would hardly fit Gee and Lankshear's (1995) conceptualisation of an enchanted workplace of the new work order. In many respects this council's workforce is largely rooted in the 'old' capitalism, the Fordist /

Taylorist mould where many workers felt alienated from management. Some comments in the interviews confirmed this. One worker stated: '... as they say, might's right ... you do it our way or get out'. To some extent these comments can be seen as traditional working class enmity towards management (eg Donaldson, 1991:11-15)

This feeling of alienation is understandable when seen in the context of generally negative community views on council workers as illustrated earlier (page 25/26). It is also understandable in view of the anti-worker discourse promoted in some areas of the popular press. This was demonstrated in yet another 'local council' story to hit the headlines in the press during the period of this research. *The Daily Telegraph* (May 28, 1996) ran a headline: '\$50,000 a year to collect garbage'. The story expressed outrage over council workers who managed to be paid 'executive salaries' ranging from \$35,000 to \$49,300 through overtime payments. But buried later in the article it was acknowledged that base salaries of council waste collectors ranged from only \$25,000 to \$32,000. To put this story into even greater perspective, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 6, 1996) ran an article just over a week later with a headline 'Council pay raises a \$200,000 question'. This article speculated on which local council was paying its managers \$200,000 a year!

Some of the council workers in this study were keenly aware of the devaluation of their work relative to other (managerial) work in the council. For years maintenance and construction workers had watched their workforce numbers decline while the managerial ranks increased in at 'Town Hall':

... when he (council worker) asks for that little bit of extra in the pay packet, oh, no, that's not forthcoming, because we can't afford that, but the rises that we've seen in management in this council in the last five or six years has been astronomical compared to what the workers receive ... We had one man, who was the town clerk, let's say he was on \$50,000 ... he was boss of town hall ... so then in come general managers, general managers immediately increased from about \$50,000 to ... \$130,000, and you'll find most of the managers are on about \$120,000, so then in come on top of that, divisional heads, to finance the departments, engineering department, and the number of staff who have increased in the town hall since I started work compared to what's increased in the outside force is absolutely shocking ... they find jobs for, they've never had training officers, personnel ... There was one personnel officer when I came in, now we've got three ... jobs for the boys ...

If the cultural schism in this local council context between the old and the new capitalism is to be better understood, there needs to be greater

understanding of the disenchantment and cynicism of some workers. The introduction of new workplace practices such as teamwork and the institution generally of the 'new work order' is unlikely to be successful unless these factors are addressed in some way. It is quite meaningless for a manager to express the view that he wants workers to be happy, to work smarter (and very possibly harder) for no additional pay when some workers are so cynical due to the perceived lack of equity in the council. As one worker clearly demonstrated:

... David says to us, I enjoy my job, but at \$90,000 a year we'd enjoy it a lot bloody more too ... Like, we take home ... \$20,000 I've earned so far this year, up to date, \$20,000 take home ... I'm not much better than a person living on the dole, and then I come here and I cop this ... I want you to be more productive, think more for the firm, and you think, geez, there's something wrong here, the eggs aren't in the basket right, a bit lop-sided ... I mean, I don't expect a substantial pay rise, but just a little would help I suppose ...

To further explain the extent of this cynicism, this same worker mid-way through the interview suddenly claimed:

... like you're here, I see this questionnaire you've got, that's from council, that's all the things they want to know, not what you want to know, that's what they want to know, and I'm answering them ...

On further clarification and a disclaimer from the interviewer he added:

I hope I can believe you, but as I say I feel, just put yourself in my seat ... When I read these, this is council to me, because I've worked here for long enough to know the deceitfulness of this council, in a sense, it's not up front, it's not like, OK fellas, you know, we've got a beef, we're going to go about it, what's your beef?

For workers such as these it was not only disenchantment and cynicism, but a deep-seated mistrust of management in the council which clearly has implications for the effectiveness of the introduction of new workplace practices such as competitive teams.

Accommodation or resistance

So far in this section of the report the focus has been exclusively on resistance. Workers explained why they resisted the new workplace discourse. Except, of course, no one had refused to participate in the introduction of competitive teams, but rather, their underlying beliefs and

attitudes were at odds with the new discourse. These workers could see through the discourse and they did not like the ideology they found behind it. They believed, based on past experiences, that the council simply wanted them to work harder for no extra reward. The situation that existed here was similar to the public/private discrepancies Anyon (1983) described in a study of accommodation and resistance involving gender and class. Many of these council workers publicly accommodated the new work discourse, but privately they resisted it in a case of resistance *within* accommodation. For their part they intended to work very much as they had always worked. They considered, for example, that they had always worked cooperatively as a 'team' (gang), and because the council was not paying them any extra money they were unlikely to want to take on additional responsibilities. This was the role of the team leader (the ganger): 'that's what he gets paid for'. As for being happier at work, the above quotations from the interview transcripts are self explanatory.

Nevertheless, the men featured so far in this section did not represent all maintenance and construction workers. There was one team that had little difficulty in accommodating the new work order. It was perhaps no accident that this team involved some of the youngest workers, workers who did not have the historical perspective on workplace alienation that some of the older workers had. Take the case of Phil, who at forty-two was one of the younger workers. He was a happier worker in a competitive team and he was able to take pride in his work despite no extra pay. He explained how before in a maintenance gang they were always 'under the eye of everybody' and suffered the stereotypical public condemnation of council workers for supposedly not working hard enough. Now, working exclusively on constructing footpaths, the general public treated them differently:

like people coming out, going, you're doing a good job now, you're getting the compliments rather than the abuse ... lazy bludgers or whatever, now it's er, lovely footpath ...

For Phil, the more focused work on footpaths, despite it being harder work, was nevertheless more rewarding. The day was more interesting, it went quicker, and at the end of the day he could look back on his work and feel good about doing a good job.

Although this competitive team was the exception, there were other workers who similarly 'accommodated' the new work order. Terry, for example, who was close to forty years of age, had previously worked with the Water Board. He had experienced new workplace practices, had become 'multiskilled', and took the current changes in the council very much in his stride.

But the issues for management in this council related to the 'greatest challenge' outlined earlier (page 8) in discussions on the new work order. That is, how could there be a shift in the attitudes of these workers from the culture of the old capitalism to take on the new capitalism with its attendant commitment to the core values of the enterprise. Interestingly, though, and this will be taken up later, these council workers did claim to have a commitment to providing a 'service' to ratepayers which is, in fact, a core value of the council. But to do so at a 'profit', or to do so at the behest of a management they had little faith in, was a different matter. Nevertheless, one way of attempting this cultural shift to the new capitalism is through education and training.

7. WORKPLACE EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The training program

There was recognition by the manager and the supervisors that the introduction of competitive teams and new ways of working required a training program for the workers. A series of training sessions were conducted for all the construction and maintenance workers and attendance was obligatory. The sessions were usually held in the afternoons in work time in the training room at the depot. Each session accommodated approximately fifteen workers.

The training program was conducted by the manager of the depot, two of his supervisors and a private training consultant. The sessions appeared to be well planned, with a mix of video segments, lecture format with the use of a 'Powerpoint' computer program, and small-group activities. The manager, supervisors and the educational provider each undertook a particular segment of the program to present. Each of the workers was expected to attend three or four afternoon sessions.

The two researchers participated as observers in just one of these afternoon sessions. This session included the following elements: a workshop address on the need to work 'smarter'; a motivational video featuring the 'guru' of management reform, Tom Peters; a small-group workshop activity in which workers had to determine the most effective/efficient way to complete a number of driveways; and a segment on the need to improve communication skills.

It was made clear that the training program was 'experimental' in the sense that it was one of the very few structured training programs that workers had attended, and it was the first time that the manager and two of his supervisors had undertaken the role of formal training session 'presenter'. For the supervisors in particular, this appeared a somewhat stressful role.

Because the whole process was new for everyone concerned, the aims of the training program were fairly general and moderate. According to David, the depot manager:

The main aim of the training is to get people information so that everybody gets the same information, information on where we're heading and why we're heading there and just touch on how we can maintain the momentum or increase the momentum to make sure that we can get there ... And it's only touched on lightly ...

Thus, it was not considered to be a high powered training program, but more a matter of ensuring everyone knows what the issues are. It might even be seen as a 'softening' process, the first stage in getting the workers on-side in preparation for the later increased commitment to the enterprise that is required in the new work order. According to David and Tony, they gained the impression that workers were coming round and taking more of an interest. Tony, for example, acknowledged that some of the workers did not want to be there, but they often became interested as the issues evolved:

Yeah, some of the older guys don't like it, but they're almost forced into training ... If they want to sit there and twiddle their thumbs, then so be it, we can't force them to learn, we can only force them to attend, but they'll sit there and twiddle their thumbs for a while, but then an argument will come up and they'll put their two cents worth in and then they'll get interested ...

Eric, an older supervisor who took no role in the training, was hopeful that some of the training would 'sink in', but he was quite pragmatic about the attitude of most workers to attending. He claimed that workers did not see this training to be very relevant to them, and they were more concerned to be out doing the job for which they were paid:

They're under the idea that they're there to do the drains, the roads and the paths and that's what they're supposed to do ... and to come in for half a day is not doing, that's two drains we didn't do or one concrete they didn't pour ... A lot of these blokes go, but they don't like the meeting at all ... They're quite against it ...

What the workers think

Of the fifteen workers interviewed, the two team leaders of the construction teams in particular were favourably inclined towards the training, but then, they were the most educated of the workforce and could appreciate the value of education and training in terms of their own careers. Several members of the teams and gangs also saw the training favourably. Phil, for example, thought it would 'open your eyes a bit' and a construction worker expressed some enthusiasm, but the majority of workers interviewed were either ambivalent or, as Eric indicated above, quite against it.

Eddie was most scathing; he said it was: 'a waste of bloody money and time I think, it doesn't help me out here'. He could not see any relevance in the training program, even the exercise involving the construction of driveways. While it was a hypothetical exercise, he was concerned more about the reality:

It just doesn't work out that you can do it that way ... you don't know the snags you'll come across, like all these roots in these trees here ... they're looking at an open, dead straight ... it's like when they price a house, you see the glossy ad on the TV, this house is only \$126,000 on your land, but they don't tell you that your land has got to be dead level ...

There were other workers, such as Robert, who thought this exercise might be beneficial, but he was adamant that he worked through a consultative process anyway with his gang to arrive at the most effective way of doing jobs. He said that was the whole point of the exercise, to show that a 'team' effort could result in some better ways of working. Robert's main criticism was that he felt 'belittled' by the training program:

... you know, I feel like a school kid again ... and the nature of the way it's taught to us in a sense, then I feel like, you know, here we are in a classroom ...

Several workers mentioned their objection to watching an American video based on a factory context that was so different from their own council work context. Michael, for example, stated:

... you see videos, every video you see is on an assembly line track ... American, yanks, you must do this ... Don't tell me we can't put together a training program in Australia for Australians, for the type of work that is done here ...

And there were workers such as Alfred, in his early sixties, who thought for workers his age training was a waste of time, though he did concede it was a good idea for the younger workers.

From observing the training in action it seemed to the researchers that generally workers were cooperating and some were getting involved in the program with some interest, but this overview could be deceptive. For example, we later asked one worker who appeared to take an active role in the training session what he thought of the program. He replied that he had already been through these sorts of training programs before in another government organisation and he did not find this latest training useful. As for his apparent 'active' role in the sessions, he stated simply: 'Oh, yeah, you've got to ... they ask questions, you answer them'.

The role of literacy/numeracy

During the interviews we did not specifically probe the literacy/numeracy difficulties experienced by the workers, especially when it became apparent that on-the-job there was very little literacy/numeracy required. But the training program shifted the context to an educational arena - a formal learning environment in a training room. The training program took on the atmosphere of formal learning. The focus was on computer-generated overhead transparencies and formal presentations. One worker, Robert, has already been quoted as feeling out of place, returning to a 'school' environment in which few of the workers would previously have achieved much success. Further, when the lights were dimmed and the main focus was a computer-generated overhead crammed with text, the ability to read did become an issue. We suspect that many of the workers sat quite mystified by some of the texts they were exposed to in the training program and this contributed to their lack of interest. Most of the workers interviewed readily acknowledged that there were many workers in construction and maintenance who had reading and writing difficulties.

Certainly Phil would have experienced difficulties undertaking the text-mediated training program. He acknowledged in the interview, without deliberate prompting, that he had difficulties reading and writing:

Interviewer: Do you think people have any problems with writing or spelling or calculations ... in the depot?

Phil: Oh, yeah, few new Australians and that ... Like, they've been here for years ... even me sometimes, like, not much in the reading and writing sort of thing, never had to do it much in me life, see, always working outside, know how to start a shovel, that was it ...

David, in presenting sessions, discovered quite early in the program that it was not just literacy, but quite basic numeracy also that was an issue:

... I speak for about half an hour on activity numbers, activity descriptions and the units of measure, and people don't understand square metres or cubic metres, going right back to that base level, and it's something that came through in the second session, somebody asked the question, what's m² ... what's that mean?

Ken, a maintenance gang worker, confirmed these difficulties. He said he was still confused over imperial and metric measures and when asked about the training program he referred to the last session involving activity numbers and stated: 'I'm not for figures, so, I just switch off'.

Other training

The workers were also asked about their own training needs and what training they had undertaken while working in the council.

It was clear from the interviews that few workers had received much training, and for some this was an issue of contention because there appeared to be plenty of training going on in other areas of the council, especially in the town hall. Michael, for example, claimed he had very rarely seen the council's training officer in the engineering section:

... to me, if you're a training officer you're not only training bimbos who are up at town hall with a collar and tie ... you're training the workforce

There were some workers who said they had done one or two courses, and these included courses such as: chain saw, backhoe operation, bitumen laying, and traffic control, but there were others who claimed that after more than a decade in the council they had done no training at all. And those that did have training and qualification of some kind had usually obtained them elsewhere. Terry, for example, stated:

As I said, I've had all the training in the Water Board ... I've got me backhoe, bobcat, train licence, 3B licence, got me dangerous goods licence, closed structures licence, everything

There are a couple of ways of viewing this situation. As one worker indicated, in his opinion this line of work really does not require training:

... to lay a pipe, you lay a pipe, to lay a bit of concrete you lay a bit of concrete ... You can train to be a computer operator and all this because they're updating, but concrete doesn't get updated ... you can't change techniques in that ... pour it in, level it off ...

This attitude possibly explained why so little training had been undertaken by these workers, that it was not considered a priority because the work was low skilled. Also, as a couple of the men noted, there seemed little point in providing training to men who were in their sixties and waiting for retirement.

But this perspective was not shared by all workers. Some considered that training was essential for this type of work, but it did not have to be formalised training requiring attendance at a course; it could be more effective if it was conducted on-site as a form of apprenticeship, or what

some researchers refer to as 'situated learning' (Billett, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Michael, for example, saw this as the way to go:

Interviewer: Is there any particular training you think people will need with the movement towards competitive teams?

Michael: I honestly believe we could all be taught on the job ... they'd have to have someone, right, you go out with that gang, you stay there for a fortnight, you learn the way that they do this, this and this, because you don't know much about that ... go out there

Interviewer: So, each one teach one sort of thing

Michael: Yeah, you learn off the one, the one you're working with, and if they've got any kind of intelligence, they should pick it up in a fortnight, four weeks ... so then you say, right, you've learnt how to do that, set up a board there, gutter going round in a circle, circumference ... Now we'll put you with this gang, we'll teach you how to do a straight run ... that's just my opinion

Interestingly, and by accident, this was precisely how Tim had recently learnt some new concreting skills. Although he had been in the council for seven years, he had recently been placed with a new ganger who was teaching him new skills:

Interviewer: Someone said that people in teams could train other people, for example, if you really wanted to learn about concreting, you could sort of be taught by somebody in another team who's good at it

Tim: Well, I could give you a personal, on a personal level with Robert ... Robert has taught me more in the space of two weeks than I've been on the council, and I've been on the council seven years.

Interviewer: Right

Tim: Yeah, possibly that ... Maybe they should have training people on the job when they start just to make sure, because there is a right way and a wrong way to do concrete, so from what I can see, Robert's way is the best way ... I've learnt more as I said

There were other workers who also acknowledged that they had learnt their skills largely on-the-job.

Opposition to formal learning

While views varied, generally these workers were unhappy about attending

formal training. The classroom/training room was anathema to many of these workers, possibly because it represented an aspect of their lives, formal learning, that had not provided them with rewards in the past. This may account for Robert feeling 'belittled' in the training program. Most of these workers left school at the minimum school leaving age (fifteen and less in some cases) with no formal education qualifications. Many would also have considered they have problems managing basic literacy and numeracy, and while they felt they were relatively unaffected by this in their regular work, attending formal training could expose these problems.

The issue of literacy and numeracy ability illustrates an important point. The usual response to lack of literacy and numeracy is to provide a formal education/training program. David, the manager, had already indicated he foresaw the need for higher levels of literacy from the workers, and while no effort had been made at that stage to provide a 'remedial' program, he indicated that such a program had been considered. In light of comments from the workers, however, it is unlikely that this would be successful. Comments from Phil bear this out. He openly acknowledged that he was 'not much in the reading and the writing sort of thing', but when he was asked if he would like the chance to improve these skills he clearly indicated he was not interested:

Phil: ... like, if I wanted to go to school, then I would have stayed at school

Interviewer: Would you like the chance now to sort of just doing what you need to learn so you can fill in the ... ?

Phil: No

Interviewer: You wouldn't want to do it?

Phil: No, like I said, I would've done it back then ...

Interviewer: If you'd really wanted to ...

Phil: Yeah, well, I get by on jobs here, like, I can lay bricks, got me truck licence through here ... I can do whatever I find in my life that I need to be able to do I can already do ... like in the work I do reading and writing's not really er ... (needed?)

It is highly unlikely that Phil would voluntarily attend a workplace or community literacy program organised along formal learning lines (ie classroom-based). The same would apply to workers who indicated problems with numeracy. Ken, who 'switched off' in the training session when the focus was on activity numbers, would not willingly attend a formal

learning program to improve his numeracy skills. As he stated: 'I'm not a theory man ... practical wise I'll have a go at it'.

For the most part formal training does not work with these workers. In fact, the more 'professional' the presentation of training sessions, the less likely these workers would be to respond well to them. The manager, supervisors and the private consultant who presented the obligatory training sessions outlined earlier provided carefully crafted step-by-step computer images on the screen using a Powerpoint software program, but in doing so they misread their target audience. Virgona (1994:142) states that such a presentation within a behaviourist paradigm can be seen as part of the industrial training culture:

Quality has often been measured by the slickness of the presentation and the glossiness of the materials. Carefully prepared overheads present the answers with conviction, true to the dictates of 'good communication' ...

It appears in this council workplace training context that the more technical and professional the presentation, the more removed it was seen to be from the reality of the workplace and the more alienating it was found to be by some workers. Added to this was cynicism resulting from an American cultural influence in the form of motivational videos featuring Tom Peters, and an inappropriate industrial context (ie assembly line work). What is appropriate for training managerial staff is not necessarily appropriate for council field workers.

The training program was always intended to be a one-way flow of information from a management perspective - to inform workers of the broader industrial climate and the need for (them to) change. This was demonstrated somewhat contemptuously by comments from the supervisor, Tony, who stated: 'I think its just teaching them real world stuff, like, they've been in this protected environment in the council for so long ...'. It became apparent to the researchers observing this training (admittedly on only the one afternoon), that at work in the training room were two distinct cultures - management and workers, representing two different identities. This was reflected not only in their different roles as presenters and receivers of information, but in their dress - the workers in their outdoor clothes and boots, the manager, supervisors and training personnel with their collars and ties (one bow tie in fact - the visiting training manager). The training program was an attempt by management to win over the workers (in discourse terms - to colonise them, see Virgona, 1994:133). But, despite the best efforts of the presenters and attempts at times to actively involve the workers through collaborative work on hypothetical examples of

construction activities, the training was resisted by many workers. This was due largely to their pre-existing cynicism, disenchantment and distrust of management in the council (see pages 38-41), and their general opposition to the formal educational environment of the training program.

Situated learning

It would appear almost self evident that learning from other workers was the most effective way of developing specific work skills in this council context, and this was confirmed in the case of Tim, who improved his concreting skills markedly through working closely with one particular ganger, Robert. In recent years some academics have made similar points. Marsick and Watkins (1990), for example, draw attention to the role of informal and incidental learning in the workplace, and Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to 'situated learning' and a process they call 'legitimate peripheral participation' which is a form of apprenticeship in which learners through participation in 'communities of practice' come to master the knowledge and skills of particular occupations. They demonstrate that through such participation learning occurs without the necessity of explicit instruction. Billett (1993, 1996) similarly argues the value of situated learning in the workplace and explains that in a workplace curriculum model the focus should be on *learning* rather than *teaching*. He also highlights the role of close or 'proximal' guidance by other workers. Mentors in particular can provide important 'proximal' guidance (Caldwell et al, 1993), which would appear to be the case with Tim learning from Robert.

This is not to say that off-the-job training programs in the council have no role, but bearing in mind the dispositions of these council workers to the formal training program outlined earlier, off-the-job training would need to be strongly contextualised with maintenance and construction work if it was to result in effective learning by the workers (Watkins, 1991). Certainly, the slick, step-by-step behaviourist approach of the industry training culture is unlikely to be well received by these council workers, based on their previous comments. Besides which, the behaviourist paradigm which underpins so many workplace training programs has been challenged by adult educators who favour a more active, critical and reflective role from participants (eg Marsick, 1988; Collins, 1994).

Situated learning also has an important role to play in assisting workers to manage literacy/numeracy practices. In adopting a sociocultural approach, some researchers have referred to literacy as 'situated social practice', that is, literacy (and numeracy) has value largely in terms of what people use literacy for, the meaning it has for them in particular situations, the role it has

in their lives (see Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Heath, 1993; Street, 1984, 1993). Thus, literacy, as indicated earlier (page 5), is not seen as a set of autonomous technical skills that people either have or do not have or which can be taught separately in an education/training program and then applied to every situation in their lives. Instead, literacy, as a social practice, is seen to relate to the situations/contexts of people's lives. By and large people develop the ability to manage the literacy practices they need according to the situations in their lives where it is needed. It has been argued that these situations are so varied and thus the literacy practices are so varied, that we should more accurately be talking about *literacies* appropriate to these situations (eg Lankshear et al. 1997). In the case of some of the workers in this study who consider they 'are not much in the reading and writing sort of thing', they are more likely to gain control over particular literacy practices if these practices are learnt when they are used in the workplace. In the case, for example, of writing a quotation for a job, this can be learnt on-the-job when it is required. Or as Eric, a supervisor, noted earlier, gangers just learn to do the basic calculations involved in concrete pours in their minds. Workers are not required to attend an off-the-job course in basic numeracy, it is just part of learning how to do their job (ie situated learning), just as they learn how to finish concrete and undertake other aspects of their work.

The problem in this local council context, however, is there are very few situations in which literacy practices feature in the work of team and gang members. Currently it does not matter if they have difficulties generally with literacy and numeracy, and certainly an off-the-job program focusing on developing literacy and numeracy 'skills' would be doomed to failure in this workplace context. If and when workers are confronted with literacy and numeracy practices (ie at the time when workers are required to be 'knowledge workers') they would be best learnt while on the job. This is not to say that there is no role for the professional educator, but it is to suggest that their role needs to be closely situated in actual workplace practices if it is to be most effective. Their role could also include assisting workplace mentors (for example, gangers) who in turn are ideally placed to assist fellow workers.

Certainly, within the broader field of vocational education and training (VET), curriculum developers and educational providers are increasingly recognising that literacy and numeracy practices are best taught not as separate skills, but as an 'integrated' (ie conceptually similar to 'situated') part of VET (Courtenay & Mawer, 1995; Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin, 1994). Many workplace language and literacy programs now feature 'enterprise-based' teachers which enable teachers to more closely define language and literacy practices and issues situated within workplace cultures.

8. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The view from below

This research study from the outset was intended to be local and qualitative. The focus was on one group of workers in one part of a local council. The main disadvantage of such a research method is the difficulty in generalising the findings. The main advantage, however, is the insights that such a qualitative study can provide. This study has provided some insights of the type not often highlighted in the literature on the new capitalism. It gives some voice to a small group of workers, a view from below as opposed to the mainstream picture of workplace reform from above (Hart, 1992). It has demonstrated that these workers by and large were not prepared to accept the discourse of the new work order uncritically, that is, they were not prepared to accept the 'cultural cloning' involved in taking on the new workplace culture (see Cope & Kalantzis, 1997). While on the surface (publicly) many were prepared to work in teams and attend training programs, beneath the surface (privately) they held views that resisted the new discourse, even though they may have lacked the power to directly challenge it.

Not that these workers were unanimous in the views and attitudes they held. Within a dialectic of accommodation and resistance (see Anyon, 1983:21-23), this study has indicated a range of responses in which clearly for some workers (one team in particular) there was accommodation and very little resistance, while for many others there appears private resistance of some kind. For this latter group, in effect, it meant they were not really inclined to work much differently and certainly not much 'smarter' than before. They were unlikely, though there were some exceptions, to be prepared to work 'over the top' for management in the council due to their disenchantment, cynicism and distrust of council management. And yet despite this, and this is a significant contradiction, they did have a deep commitment to providing a 'public service' to those people the council represents, the ratepayers in the area. This was because they believed in the 'use value' of their work. They felt strongly that roads, footpaths and drains needed to be maintained properly, hence their objection to their work being taken over by contractors who, in their opinion, do not have the interests of ratepayers at heart.

These issues were not followed up in depth in the interviews, but it would seem that this belief in providing a useful public service provided an important *motivating force* underpinning the work of many of these team and gang members. This could be due in part to the direct contact they have with,

and hence a responsibility they feel towards, the ratepaying public, and it might also be due to the poor image council workers are perceived to have in the general community, which many workers are keen to negate. In some cases, though, these workers are themselves the ratepaying public because they live within the same council area in which they work. Certainly, the interviews revealed that, despite their belief in providing a public service, some of these workers believed this service was not currently providing value for the ratepayer's money, a factor they attributed solely to the poor management of the council in the town hall, and particularly in relation to the way workforce numbers had been reduced in this maintenance and construction area in recent years.

Interestingly, as outlined earlier (page 9/10), one of the significant strategies of enterprises working within the discourse of the new work order is to get their workers to identify with the goals and the vision of the enterprise so that these workers will work 'over the top' in the interests of the enterprise. In the case of these council workers, however, this had already been achieved - they did identify strongly with the core values of providing a public service and this situation existed before the new work discourse came along. One of the maintenance team members, Michael, for example, explained how he had worked 'over the top' for the council in the past though with little real acknowledgement from management:

... Like, I've seen times here, the infrastructure in this place ... is very old, inclined to jam up when you have big storms ... You have a lot of problems, you know, people say the gutters are overflowing, it's going into my place, and that ... I've seen times here where we've worked back, right through the night, you know, twelve o'clock at night ... We got a thanking, that's all we got ...

Continuing along this line of enquiry, it could be argued that, as a corollary, an important *disincentive or lack of motivation* for some of these council workers to work 'over the top' for the council, as indicated previously, was their negative views towards the management of the council, represented both materially and symbolically by the 'town hall'. Thus, quite the reverse of the dictates of the discourse of the new work order, in this local council context management's introduction of new workplace practices (competitive teams, training programs and the promotion of new ways of thinking) may in fact be counter productive due to the private resistance of these workers to council management. A case of the more interventionist and reformist the council management becomes, the less inclined are some workers to comply (at least privately). It would appear to be in accord with the situation described earlier by Gee, Hull and Lankshear (on page 9), of widespread cynicism by workers of the old capitalism who are confronted with the new work order, and their response is to believe they are being duped into

duped into working harder.

This inverse relationship to the implementation of the new work order is at present speculative, based on the views of a small nucleus of disenchanted and resistant workers in this one council site, but it could well extend to workers in other public services (see below). It is also difficult to believe that the resistance demonstrated by many workers in this study has not been found or at least documented in the many workplace literacy reports in recent years in Australia (eg DEET, 1994; 1995a; DEETYA, 1996) following recognition of the role of literacy in the economy (eg DEET, 1991a), and in particular, following the introduction of WELL funding from 1991. But as indicated earlier, overwhelmingly, the federal government sponsored documentation on these programs is consensus-orientated. It is very difficult to find critical analyses of workplace literacy programs in Australia or any recognition of resistance to the new work order by workers. As Wickert and Baynham (1994:182) indicate, critical approaches involve going beyond 'official versions of literacy practices' to try to understand literacy practices in use and how they engage with 'the complex ways in which literacy practices combine with other kinds of practices in the social organisation of work'. An approach which is clearly congruent with this current study of council workers.

The council as a microcosm

It struck the researchers in this study that the views expressed by these workers 'from below' may be very similar to those felt, but as yet largely unarticulated, in other publicly funded organisations which are faced with the same new work discourse. Public education teachers in VET organisations, for example, are being told by management that they are the new knowledge workers. As middle management is being reduced, frontline managers (such as heads of departments) are being encouraged to become team leaders and to take on more responsibility. Vision statements and corporate goals are assuming more prominence. There are the occasional critiques of the overall direction in which public education is moving in the new capitalism (eg Anderson, 1995; Fooks, 1996; Peoples, 1996), but as yet, it is largely the managerial voice that is heard. It is possible that the disenchantment, cynicism and distrust of management expressed by the council workers in this study are replicated in public education authorities. Also, like the council workers, teachers are likely to feel strongly about and have a commitment to the 'public service' their organisation offers and their opposition to the use of private educational providers and 'consultants' is based largely on their view that the quality of education suffers when education is reduced to a 'commodity' and sold for profit (ie surplus value). Doubtless there are many other publicly funded organisations outside of

education whose staff have similar reservations about this extension of the profit motive.

What future?

There are no easy solutions to offer to the complexities and contradictions inherent in this council work site, just as Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) have indicated there are no easy solutions to the contradictions of the new work order generally. What they do have to offer from their postmodernist perspective is recognition of the need for renewed thought, critique, and struggle in relation to discourses. They argue that discourses are difficult to change, but they nevertheless can be changed by juxtaposing them with other alternative discourses (emancipatory discourses in the case of challenging the discourse of the new world order). Currently, however, it is difficult to be optimistic that the discourse of the new work order will change direction in any significant way in the near future and become less threatening to workers (see Thutrow, 1996).

But what this study has demonstrated is the private resistance of a small group of workers to the discourse of the new work order and a critique of its application in this local council context. Further, this discourse has been found to be largely theoretical. While the introduction of new workplace practices such as teamwork, working 'smarter' and training programs are in accord with the new discourse, in practice, these workers appeared to be working little differently. They claimed that as 'gangs' they had always worked as 'teams' and while perhaps they might acknowledge that their time could be used more efficiently by planning ahead more, this did not require a wholesale shift to a new work order, just a tightening up of present practices. Further, these workers have always learnt their skills on the job, and certainly it is difficult to justify a renewed emphasis on training and 'skills' such as literacy and numeracy given the extent and level of literacy and numeracy practices in this type of work. Many of these workers were probably now working harder, but that was due largely to a change in the nature of their work (now concreting longer stretches of footpaths rather than maintaining drains and repairing small slabs).

The manager and supervisors in this council were acting in what they thought were the best interests of the workers. By 'changing' the way council workers worked, and making them 'competitive', they believed they were potentially saving the jobs of their workers. But, ironically, by imposing these changes 'from above', they appeared to be actually increasing the private resistance of some workers, adding to the cynicism and disenchantment and feelings of 'disempowerment' of these workers. Imposing these workplace

changes in effect demonstrated that management did not really value the existing workplace cultures (see Cope & Kalantzis, 1997:109-110). One of the supervisor's comments that these workers needed to 'get in the real world' and that 'you can't live your lap of luxury all the time' is indicative of a lack of value regarding the traditional work practices of these council workers.

Many of these workers, therefore, failed to see the introduction of new workplace practices as anything other than continued exploitation by management, a factor reinforced in the minds of older workers by the steady reduction in the number of maintenance and construction workers in the council in recent years. Many of these workers were unmoved by management's attempts to change the social identities of workers by suggesting they take greater responsibility and derive more meaning, and even happiness, from their work. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:23) ask rhetorically whether the new capitalism is 'a new soft touch hegemony' or 'a more humane face of capitalism'? Clearly, the 'resistant' workers in this council considered it to be the former.

In a very real sense these workers are at the crossroads of the old and the new capitalism. They are being told basically to 'get in the real world' and thus take on the new work order discourse or get out. There is little real choice to their public accommodation to this discourse because there are not many job opportunities for men in their late forties, fifties and early sixties who have spent the best part of their working life in relatively unskilled labouring work. While there are some who appear happy to accommodate new workplace practices, both publicly and privately, they tend to be younger workers without a historical perspective of struggle in workplace relations. Many of the older workers, however, retain their traditional worker identities and are privately resisting. They are too aware that the main point of the exercise is to extract more of their surplus labour and at the same time they see inequities in a system that appears to favour council staff at the town hall. From their perspective they see through and resist the ideology of the new work discourse. For them little has changed. As one worker stated: '... they're the bosses and you're the workers, still, that's about'all'.

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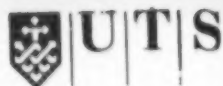
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